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Clement Desalle wins again

Story Adam Wheeler images Ray Archer

MXGP will roll onto an American finale and a dramatic closing chapter after Tony Cairoli denied Honda's Tim Gajser a date with destiny at Assen today and the Grand Prix of the Netherlands. Taking the spotlight for the first time this season at the sixteenth outing of eighteen for the series was Monster Energy Kawasaki's Clement Desalle who was the best performer on the slippy sand and savoured his maiden victory on the works KX450F and the twentieth of his career in the premier class since 2009.

The TT Circuit Assen may well be one of the most famous racing tracks in the world but it is not renowned for reliable weather. Immense thunderstorms on Saturday night created a sodden terrain that was in danger of flooding on Sunday morning with further torrential downpours. The poor climate cleared completely for the start of the MX2/MXGP race programme but the course forced the riders to exercise caution and consideration rather than being able to tackle the sandy lumps at full-gas. In the afternoon a breeze and sunshine – plus some positive repair work by the track crew – created a variation on the conditions and permitted a faster and more technical challenge.

Gajser came to the final European appointment on the schedule needing to out-score multi world champion Cairoli by just one point and before the series heads transatlantic with a double salvo in North Carolina and California. Cairoli was immense on Saturday to convincingly own pole position as the Slovenian tasted Dutch sand on two occasions and seemed slightly adrift of his sole remaining rival for the MXGP crown. On Sunday the weather levelled the playing field slightly but Gajser – vying to become the second rookie world champion to be crowned at Assen in succession – crashed twice and could only come back to twelfth. In the second moto he was throttling hard for the top three when he again left the Dutch course and contact with a fence caused a broken front brake and gas cable and prompted his first 'DNF' of an otherwise remarkable year.

As Cairoli finished as runner-up the upshot of Gajser's darkest day of the season is a reduction in his lead in the standings from 99 to 65 points and with 100 left on the table.

Frustration in the Honda camp was outweighed by smiles at Kawasaki as Desalle rode without error and thanks to two bright starts to post a 2-2 scorecard. The Belgian chased Shaun Simpson in the first moto and Cairoli in the second but his consistency was the foundation for the team's first success of '16 and maiden champagne shower for the all-new KX.

"Finally back on top of the box and this is a special moment," the 27 year old said. "I have been working a long time for this: to get back to first place and I'm enjoying it a lot. I'm happy to do it in the sand; I know I can ride it well…even if some people don't believe it too much. This is a good thing for me and for the team today."

Elsewhere Monster Energy Yamaha's Jeremy Van Horebeek was fifth overall and lucky to escape a big 'moment' in the second moto that threw the Belgian over the bars. Teammate, and still defending World Champion, Romain Febvre made a mistake in the goo of the first moto that caused him to drop into the distant regions of the pack; the Frenchman ended a hard weekend in eighth.

Jeffrey Herlings re-entered the MX2 realm and in front of rapturous home public to grind out his thirteenth victory of the year and elongate his margin at the top of the championship standings to 76 points; practically applying fingerprints on his third world title. The Dutchman was always a firm favourite in the sand but the ooze of Sunday was still a tricky prospect. He beat countryman Brian Bogers and Spanish rookie sensation Jorge Prado.

Kemea Yamaha duo Brent Van Doninck (the Belgian competing at the scene of this first career podium the previous year) and Benoit Paturel and both crashed in the first moto and had an eventful day to finally reach ninth and tenth respectively. Benoit at least defends a very decent third position in the MX2

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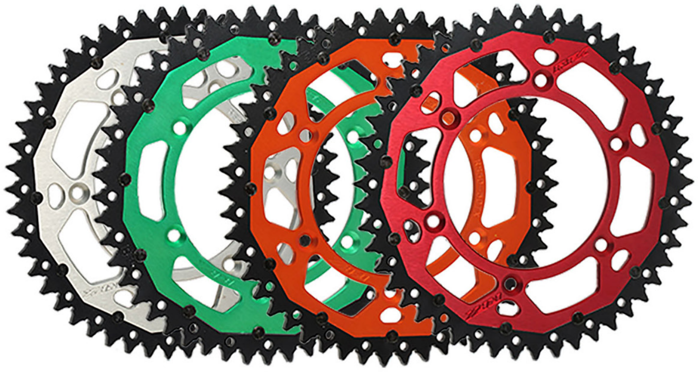

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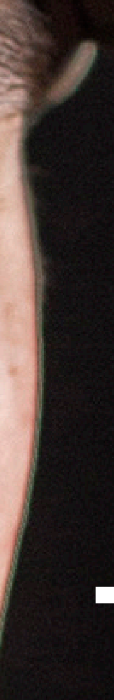

Tim Gajser

Interview Geoff Meyer images Ray Archer

Gariboldi Honda rider Tim Gajser is still a massive favorite to win this year's MXGP championship. With a 65-point lead going into the last two rounds he should be able to wrap it up this weekend in America. However, the mental strain on being so close showed last weekend in Assen when he crashed many times and eventually DN-Fed the second moto for zero points.

Gajser tough is a smart kid, and I get the feeling this weekend in Charlotte he will come out fighting and try and wrap the title up in the opening moto. His battle with former AMA champion Eli Tomac is going to be worth watching and with his ultimate goal to race in USA in 2018, you have to feel this is also an important step in his progress.

We sat down with him and asked him about what happened in Assen, and also what he expects from the USGP in Charlotte this weekend.

Motocross Illustrated: Tim, can you explain how you feel about Assen?

Gajser: Sure I am disappointed, but that can happen and really quickly. I was on the ground a lot. I came back to 12th in the first moto. Second moto I was battling and trying to reset myself. Not a bad start and good lines and I was behind Clement and went off the track and broke my front brake and gas cable, then it was over.

Motocross Illustrated: I noticed when you crashed in that second moto and your bike was stuck it was like you were looking for help to get it out of the fence, then maybe realized that wasn't allowed?

Gajser: The bike was stuck in the fence and I couldn't take it. I was looking around to see if somebody would help me, but finally I got it out myself.

Motocross Illustrated: Did you think too much about the championship coming into Assen and that made it more difficult?

Gajser: For sure, it is tough to say right now, I try and concentrate on the races, but you have in the back off your mind the championship. I will try and learn as much as possible and head to US.

Motocross Illustrated: Were you nervous before the weekend?

Gajser: You know, I didn't feel any pressure, but I knew it would be tough. Last year the track was kind of strange and even more so this year, with the storm and rain, it was really knarly and tough. I can tell you I am very disappointed, I know I could do much better, but

that is what it is and we take what we get and next week we go to US and I am really excited to race over there.

Motocross Illustrated: On Saturday and also Sunday first moto you looked cautious. Was that the case?

Gajser: Actually, I wasn't so relaxed, it wasn't me. I was too tight and didn't feel good on the track, also crashing a lot. In the second race I found some rhythm and I started catching Clement and Tony in front of me. Then I made a mistake and it was over for me, a DNF with no points.

Motocross Illustrated: How will you now get yourself mentally right for Charlotte?

Gajser: It is all mental. I am in the best shape I can be in I feel good physically. Mentally I just try and go back in Slovenia, regroup and speak with my dad what I did here. Hopefully next weekend will go better.

Motocross Illustrated: Will your dad be angry with you? How does he deal with a day like Assen?

Gajser: He will be angry for sure. He is like that. He knows I can do much better than I did this weekend and I am also angry with myself. It's a disappointing weekend for the team, and that is how it is you know. That is sport, it can happen to everyone. You cannot win all the races and all the GPs, sport isn't like that, so sometimes you have a bad weekend.

Motocross Illustrated: How excited are you about heading over to America?

Gajser: For sure it's exciting to be riding with the bike names from US racing, I am excited for Charlotte, but for sure I will take it like all the other races. Try and go and have fun and enjoy riding.

Motocross Illustrated: Will you race with those guys, or be thinking about the championship?

Gajser: Depends how I feel. If I can see it, I will race with them. It isn't easy, we go to their country, they know how to ride over there, everything is different the ground, everything. If I see I can race with them, then I will battle for the win. If I have to risk a lot to battle with them, then I will not risk that.

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Jeffrey Herlings

Interview Geoff Meyer images Ray Archer

Red Bull KTM Factory rider Jeffrey Herlings might not have had it all his own way last weekend in Assen, but the soon to be three times World MX2 champion did score a bunch of points and stretch his lead in the MX2 championship. Battling with Jorge Prado, even struggling to beat his countrymen Brian Bogers and Bas Vaessen it wasn't his most impressive performance, but as he does, he still got GP win number 60, and heads to Charlotte this weekend for the first of two USGPs. Of course, it is also where he will race AMA 250 champion Cooper Webb in an AMA vs FIM battle.

We caught up with him and asked him about his weekend and also his expected battle with the likeable American Cooper Webb, who has dominated the 250 class in America indoors and outdoors.

Motocross Illustrated: What a tough weekend, how was it after your Saturday misfortunes?

Herlings: Saturday was dry weather conditions and first practice, 2.7 faster (than everyone else), and second practice everyone was wide open, and I was just cruising for a good gate pick in the qualification race. That qualification race started good I was third. Worked my way to second and I felt like the power was getting less and less and then after about eight laps the bike just blew.

Motocross Illustrated: Sunday came around and you still had to deal with a really difficult circuit and that Prado kid?

Herlings: So I knew Sunday I was going to be right on the outside of the gate. I had two options, to either lets the pack go and go up the inside, or go with them. I took the risk of letting the field go and try and sneak up the inside, there was a big pile up and I didn't go down, but got caught up in it. Then a few corners later I did go down (hit a falling Paturel). It was unlucky, but I was quickly 8th and then got to third and crashed again and I was sixth and got back to second and I didn't want to crash and risk the championship, so I just held on for second place. I knew Jeremy (Seewer) was way back.

Motocross Illustrated: Was that circuit anything like a sand track in that first moto?

Herlings: That first moto wasn't anything like a sand track, it wasn't even motocross, it was more like endure. You couldn't push hard, you just had to survive. With the bike you felt it getting so hot and the radiators were closed with sand and you had to watch out and be careful of what to do with the bike.

Motocross Illustrated: The second moto the circuit was more like a motocross track wasn't it? What was your goal for that second moto?

Herlings: The second moto I didn't want to take too much risk (cutting up the inside again), so I started just wide open and came out in third place. I worked my way into second and was battling with Jorge and the track was pretty flat and that kid is like a third of my weight and when the track is flat and you have one good line, it's hard to pass. I had more speed, but he was riding very defensive and really well and it was just one line. It was tough, but

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we made some serious points in Seewer and we have a lead of 76 points, so we can go home happy.

Motocross Illustrated: Jorge was at times a little ruthless in his blocking. I noticed when you passed him you made some sort of hand signal to him. What was that?

Herlings: I just pointed to my brain. I was 15 once as well, so I knew he was racing like living and dying situation and I could see he was getting tired and he was taking risk and going for the moto win. I know him really well and he has told me he is a big fan of mine, but I could see he was making a lot of mistakes, so I just told him to use his brain. I passed him, but then two turns later he passed me back, but I could see he was knackered, I mean he is only 15. I have had some serious accidents in my life, but I was also 15 once and I know how that is. On the finish line jump there was some serious deep ruts and he was just taking the risk there. I am at the point I have a championship on the line and as you get older you get really calm.

Motocross Illustrated: Cooper Webb has spoken of his respect for you, and that should be a nice battle in Charlotte next weekend. What is your opinion on it?

Herlings: I don't know him, but when I see the guy, he is like me, he wants to win, he just wants to win, so we are similar in that. I think it's going to be really interesting, I have a lot of respect for him and I think he is man enough and adult enough to know I have a championship on the line, so I think he will respect that. I have big respect for him, a supercross and motocross championship this year and a person like that will have enough brains to not do anything silly and hopefully we can both get a good start and just race head to head.

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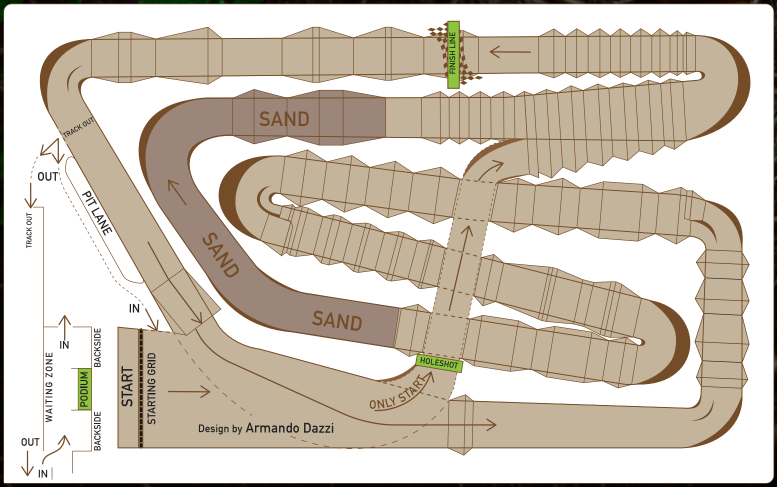

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Another Masterpiece

Story Geoff Meyer images Ray Archer

You wouldn't be far wrong from calling it the craziest Grand Prix we have ever seen. Seriously, the Grand Prix of Assen produced complete and utter madness. You couldn't see it any other way. From a 15-year-old rookie battling possibly the greatest sand rider of all time, to the MXGP red plate owner, Tim Gajser crashing out of the second moto losing a major part of his massive points lead in the process.

MXGP and MX2 is in a very nice place at the moment. The racing in both classes is at the highest level it has ever been and it doesn't matter who you ask in the paddock, most would agree with that comment, from GP veterans like Stefan Everts and Michele Rinaldi, to rookies like Tim Gajser and Romain Febvre.

Assen was just the cherry on the top of the cake in what has been a stunning 2016 season. But wait, we have more, we have two USGP's coming up, a Monster Energy Motocross of Nations and then the SMX indoor event in Germany in October.

For Clement Desalle Assen saw him return to the very top of the MXGP podium. A place he hadn't been in two years, yes two years!!!

"It feels good to be back on the top step of the podium again after two years. We've been working all season for this. I started the year with everything new - new bike, new tyres, new suspension - and then I got the injury at the worst possible time just before the first GP, but the whole team has been working hard and we have found a good base for me on all surfaces. I was second in each moto today, but I was the best rider overall on the day. After the rain in the night the first moto was all about staying on two wheels, and in race two I had to resist pressure from Coldenhoff right to the end of race; it was not easy with the lappers but I kept focused to the finish. I enjoyed the victory today and to win in sand made it even sweeter; for sure that is a surprise to some people but I am actually good in sand. I am back and now I want to win every race I start."

In the MX2 class series leader and big favorite Jeffrey Herlings didn't have it his own way, as he battled hard with 15-year-old rookie Jorge Prato, and then against the circuit.

"I think the weekend turned out very positive. We had some bad luck yesterday with the mechanical failure and I had a very bad gate pick regarding the weather circumstances. So I'm very happy to walk away with the win and to gain so many points on Seewer. So we are looking very good for the championship next weekend. I don't want to think about but now it's so close we just have to make it happen." Speaking about the coming races in the USA, he commented: "It gives me more motivation to race against the Americans but we just have to concentrate on the championship and not on going head to head with those guys."

For Antonio Cairoli, it might be a little too late to grab another world title, but his fighting qualities have once again put him in

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a place we all love to see, right in the middle of the main pack of riders.

"It was a good weekend overall but for sure it could have been even better. Especially in the first moto the track was in horrible condition. It was not fixed as it should have been, and it was very dangerous and very slow, but the same for everybody. I was bit stiff in the beginning then I had a crash and Glenn and Desalle passed me. I tried to close the gap but in the end Glenn was on the gas and he also didn't get tired. I knew it would be difficult to take the overall from fourth place. Now in the next rounds we will do our best to make it difficult for the championship and maybe also even chase the title."

But what of Jorge Prado, his debut GP, and the world suddenly became aware of this skills Spanish kid.

"Yesterday was perfect and today was also pretty good. The first moto was difficult because the track was actually not so good for me, but I still enjoyed it. I got the holeshot again in the second moto and in the first laps I was battling with my teammate 'The Bullet' (Herlings). He's the best sand rider so I enjoyed it a lot." Responding to compliments from Herlings about his riding talent, the Spanish teenager said: "He's one of my idols and one of my favorite riders. Every time he says something nice about me I get really motivated."

MXGP red plate owner Tim Gajser isn't as happy as he was a few days ago, but he will return in Charlotte this weekend and be sure he comes out swinging to wrap up his second title in as many years.

"For sure I'm disappointed with today and not happy with the result, but it's racing and we're competing at the highest level, always pushing 100 per cent, so things like this can happen. On a track like today, when it was so tough, they can happen very quickly too. First race I crashed twice and could come back to 12th but I wasn't happy with my riding because I know I can do better. Before the second moto I tried to reset myself, and actually things were going much better and we were fighting for second, but then I made a mistake and went off the track. I broke the front brake and the throttle cable of the bike so I wasn't able to continue. We don't change our strategy and come just to race and enjoy, but of course you have the championship in the back of your mind. I didn't feel relaxed this weekend and I wasn't riding well from the start of the weekend and actually didn't really enjoy it this weekend, but we can't change it now so we must just learn from it and head into Charlotte fresh and focused to start again."

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Usually on a Tuesday I do a story on the previous weekends Grand Prix, and that's still going to happen, but for the first time in a long time I keep finding myself looking ahead to next weekend, rather than last weekend.

The two USGP's really have me excited with the amount of leading AMA riders involved. More than 20 AMA riders in total, and a huge crowd expected for both races. The GP scene is on fire at the moment and even the American public are excited for these two races. But anyway, back to Assen.

What a stunning GP. It is nearly impossible to put words to this weekend. We have seen drama in nearly every single Grand Prix this year, but Assen just took the cake for complete and utter disbelief.

We had the legendary sand master Jeffrey Herlings DNFing his Saturday qualification race with a KTM that didn't want to run. Now it isn't often a bike brakes in this day and age, and it was a shocking view, but Sunday cast even more shadow over Herlings sand skills as he battled EMX riders Jorge Prado and Bas Vaessen. The opening MX2 and MXGP motos were pure survival as the best motocross riders in the world and even Herlings was one of them.

Herlings did get the GP win, but nothing like we expected and his biggest rival in the championship Jeremy Seewer finished 14th overall, turning the points lead by Herlings into 76pts.

If MX2 was wild, then MXGP was close behind. Red plate owner Tim Gajser looked terrible on the Saturday and not much better in moto one on Sunday. He did come back to his near best in the second moto, but while chasing Clement Desalle and Antonio Cairoli, he got out of shape and crashed off the track. After running onto the trackside fence, his throttle was broken and he was also scoring an unexpected DNF.

Some highlights were of course the performances of Shaun Simpson and Thomas Covington with their MXGP and MX2 moto wins on that nearly unrideable circuit. They both followed that up though with 16th place in their second motos.

Antonio Cairoli was all class again, winning the Saturday race and finishing second overall on Sunday. When it comes to riding shitty tracks, with holes and bumps everywhere, then Cairoli is the master.

Clement Desalle also picked up his first GP win in two years and heads to America and Maggiora with more confidence, which is great for those events.

Unfortunately, due to the massive rain storm on Sunday morning the crowd wasn't bigger than 2015 and while it was still a big crowd, it might not have been enough to see this event return in 2017. Let's hope I am wrong.

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KING KENNY

STORY Dan Lamb Motoxaddicts images Simon Cudby

There's not much more we can say about RCH / Soaring Eagle / Jimmy John's / Suzuki's Ken Roczen's 2016 Lucas Oil Pro Motocross 450MX Championship run that hasn't already been said. It was an amazing season for the German, and in true Championship fashion, the #94 capped off the year with his eighth 1-1 performance of the season.

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Red Bull
BEL-RAY
SUZUKI
Soaring Eagle
JIMMY
JOHN'S
94

Red Bull
SUZUKI
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LUCAS OIL
94

Just as he'd done in 20 of the 24 prior motos, Kenny quickly got to the front in both Ironman National motos and methodically broke the field's will over thirty-minutes plus two laps. Even after celebrating clinching the 450 Championship at Budds Creek with a heavy regimen of Coors Light and pizza, Kenny was still too much for the rest of the class at the finale.

After the season-ending checkered flag, Kenny sat down for the last time to answer questions from the press. MotoXAddicts' Chase Yocom was there to hit record and ask some questions.

Ken, another 1-1 today for your eighth overall win of the season. Congratulations on a great season. The racing was obviously a little bit tighter up front in moto number two than moto number one today. Can you go ahead and take us through your day?

Yeah, we really didn't know what was going to happen with the weather. It seems like yesterday or the day before it was going to be fine, and then all the sudden it changed and it was supposed to pour all day. There ended up being no clouds in the sky, and it ended up being a beautiful day. Obviously it was a little sloppy in the morning, but it changed. In the first moto, it was still a little rough in some spots with the mud and everything, but I knew for the second moto it was going to be a lot better. I grabbed awesome starts. I holeshotted the first one, and in the second one, I was top three. I just put in a good charge in the second one and went for another win. I said it last week-end; we want to do another 1-1 and finish the season off, not just slack around. That's exactly what we did, and I can't be any happier. It's good now to take some time off and enjoy everything. As good as the season was, we'll just let the whole thing settle in and enjoy.

How much did your social media blow up with the whole two-stroke

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FOX
SUZUKI
Soaring Eagle
LUCAS OIL
BEL-RAY

thing this week? [Ken was thinking of racing an RM250 two-stroke, but a rule kept that from happening.]

I probably had 1500 comments on that picture (laughs)—and they were not all positive—but I was bummed. I'm always up for shits and giggles, but I wasn't able to race it, so I had to put that out of my mind and get back to the focus of racing my normal bike.

How much did the track change from the first moto to the second moto? Did you have to make any changes? You looked super comfortable.

I made just a little change in the second practice in the mechanics' area, but after that, I left it. The track changed quite a bit. Like I said, in the first moto, it was sloppy in spots, and in the second moto, it was a good race track. You could see the ruts were pretty deep—and overall it was a pretty gnarly track—but I left my bike the same all day. At least I know how it reacts.

So what's on the dinner menu tonight?

I haven't really thought about that yet. Something good! No matter what it is, it will be something good.

The pizza and Coors seemed to work pretty well for you last week. (laughs)

It did, and it will!

What was your motivation today? You certainly didn't ride like a guy who had the title clinched.

Honestly—I'm not lying—it was really tough this whole week. I tried to tell myself, "Dude, it's not over; we have another race," but at the same time, things are wrapped up. I kind of went into vacation mode almost. It was really hard. I went out to the track and started riding and I kind of just rode around like, "Here we go." I was kind of wondering what I was doing there. It felt like the season was over, but it's not. We still had another race to go. I took it easy this week. I was on the bike just to keep the feeling. I knew for a fact I

was going to show up here and my mental game was going to be on point and everything would change. I just went out and rode and had fun.

Talk a little about what you and this team [RCH / Soaring Eagle / Jimmy John's / Suzuki] were able to accomplish this year. I think you were the first privately funded team to win the 450MX Championship.

It's huge! If you were to ask me last year at this press conference what next year was going to be like and what the changes would be, I would have said, "I do not know," but it's pretty amazing for me to see what we have done, where we came from and how much of a low we had last year. I guess, like you said, we're the first privately owned team to pull this off, and I think that speaks for itself. I had so much more fun this year. The team vibe was way better and obviously my bike was way better than last year too.

Can you talk about your relationship with team owners Ricky [Carmichael] and Carey [Hart]. Last weekend we saw you wrestling Ricky on social media.

Ricky, Carey and I are actually really good friends, especially Ricky; he's a character. I love hanging out with him besides dirt bikes. That's the most fun. (laughs) I'm probably actually going to go down to visit him in the next couple of weeks and go out with him on the boat to have some fun. It's cool for Carey to be here at the last race of the season. He wasn't here last weekend, but he came this weekend. It's exciting to have him around 'cause he never really goes to any outdoor races.

Have we seen the last race for you on the Suzuki? And what's on the calendar for you?

As of right now, this is for sure my last race until Monster Cup.

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